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RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY

RHMFIASS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE PRIORITY

RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 2188

RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO PRIORITY 2482

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000573

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DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA, AND PM/FO
NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/YERGER/GAVITO
DOD FOR OSD EDELMAN/LONG/KIMMITT/DALTON

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [KJUS](#) [MASS](#) [IR](#) [AR](#) [SY](#) [IS](#) [LE](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: SAAD HARIRI RETURNS TO LEBANON INTENT ON
ELECTING A PRESIDENT

REF: BEIRUT 571

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Classified By: CDA Michele J. Sison for reasons section
1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (S) Back at last from Saudi Arabia, majority leader Saad Hariri appears to have taken up the reins in preparing March 14's coordinated response to Speaker Berri's proposal for a new National Dialogue. Noting that March 14's acceptance will be conditioned on the election of a president on May 13, even if by simple majority, he stressed the need for strong international support. Saad offered several suggestions on how the U.S. could help, including strong public statements, fortifying its troop presence on the Syrian-Iraqi border, and providing the Lebanese Armed Forces with AH-1 Cobra attack helicopters.

¶2. (C) Saad was unconcerned about Progressive Socialist Party leader Walid Jumblatt's openness to Berri's proposal for a new National Dialogue, dismissing fears that Walid would "jump ship." He advocated more pressure on parliamentarians in Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement, to add strain to the already troubled bloc, and careful yet deliberate outreach to independent Shia. Saad dismissed an upcoming visit by Arab League SYG Amr Moussa as unlikely to have any impact on Lebanon's ongoing political crisis. End summary.

¶3. (SBU) Post recommendations/action plan contained in paragraph 12.

HOW THE U.S. CAN
SUPPORT LEBANON

¶4. (S) Charge Sison, accompanied by Pol/Econ Chief, met with March 14 majority leader Saad Hariri at his office in Qoreitem on April 27, along with Saad's advisor Ghattas Khoury and notetaker Nadine Chehab. An apparently reenergized Saad, just back from a two-month hiatus in Saudi Arabia, declared himself "on the attack" and ready to

confront Syria. Asked how the U.S. could help, Saad listed three priorities: 1) full-court international support; 2) mobilized U.S. forces on the Syrian-Iraqi border to "scare" Damascus; and 3) providing the Lebanese Armed Forces with Cobra AH-1 attack helicopters.

¶15. (C) The U.S. in particular, he said, should make strong statements condemning Syria's efforts to build a clandestine nuclear program, building on the Iraqi Interior Minister's recent accusation that Damascus was promoting terrorist activities in Iraq, condemning Syria's interference in Iraq, and reinforcing the Special Tribunal. The U.S. could even use the Middle East Peace Process as a "slam dunk" against Assad by voicing its support for the Palestinians, "smashing" Syria's efforts to use the Palestinian card for its own purposes. On the Tribunal, Saad agreed that a new UNSC resolution extending UNIIIC's mandate was an excellent opportunity to demonstrate international support for Lebanon.

OPEN TO DIALOGUE, BUT CONDITIONED
ON HOLDING ELECTION ON MAY 13

¶16. (C) Saad, who had held separate meetings with Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea, Phalange leader Amine Gemayel, and Druze leader Walid Jumblatt immediately following his April 26 return to Lebanon, confirmed that March 14 was leaning towards accepting Berri's proposal for a new National Dialogue. We can't close the door on dialogue, he explained. He stressed, however, that acceptance would be conditioned on holding the presidential election on May 13, even if the absence of a two-thirds quorum of Members of Parliament meant that the majority would have to proceed with a simple majority election. Saad said he planned to meet with Berri soon and would issue a public statement thereafter to ensure that he retained the initiative rather than allow Berri to

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relay his own interpretation of the meeting.

JUMBLATT NOT CAVING

¶17. (C) Saad, who had spent one and a half hours one-on-one with Walid Jumblatt the previous evening, was unconcerned the Druze leader's receptiveness to Berri's proposal. Walid, he said, takes no decisions without consulting me. Although some always will fear that he will "jump ship," Walid has maintained a consistent position since 1998 and will not work with Aoun or Hizballah, Saad said, although he tries to keep an open line of dialogue with Berri. Noting that Berri could not act without permission from Syria and Hizballah, Saad said that Jumblatt's sense was that Berri was sincere in wanting to resolve the ongoing political impasse.

EXPANDING SUPPORT FOR MARCH 14

¶18. (C) Pointing to recent accounts of troubles within the Aoun bloc, which he expected to continue, Saad also suggested that the U.S. and France use available tools to pressure Free Patriotic Movement parliamentarians to go to parliament, noting that several Aoun MPs are French citizens. Asked by the Charge about March 14 efforts to build better relations with independent Shia, Saad said March 14 was talking to them, but had to be careful not to lump them together, which only made them an easier target for Hizballah. Instead, we should help build their niche support; later, when they are stronger, they can unite, he said.

¶19. (C) Noting the upcoming visit of Lebanese Option Gathering Ahmad Assad's to Washington (reftel), Saad said Assad needed to understand that March 14 wants to help, but can't be at the forefront. Groups like Assad's should work on the ground ("and not in the U.S.," he said, implicitly criticizing Assad's second trip within as many months). All politics in

Lebanon is grass roots, he explained. Saad dismissed Assad's efforts to recruit former Hizballah SYG Subhi Tufayli based on claims he was ready to join forces against Hizballah, saying Tufayli was "nothing" on the ground and had no followers.

NO POINT IN AMR MOUSSA COMING

¶10. (C) Saad dismissed Arab League SYG Amr Moussa's planned May 2 visit to Lebanon to attend the Arab Economic Forum, saying there was no point in Moussa meeting with Lebanese leaders until they had something to offer. Saad said he did not trust Moussa, the Egyptians were losing confidence in him, and, drawing his hand across his throat, added that the Saudis especially were fed up. He noted that PM Siniora, who had traveled to Cairo over the weekend on a private visit and whom Saad planned to see upon his return, did not see Moussa while in Egypt.

COMMENT

¶11. (C) It is reassuring to see Saad in fighting mode; we hope it lasts and that he heeds his own advice to Ahmad Assad of working on the ground and not abroad. We also applaud his determination to get out in front of both the cameras and Berri, a show of force and initiative that March 14 too often is lacking. Whether it was his two months in Saudi Arabia or his impromptu meeting with local school children visiting his father's memorial just prior to our meeting, Saad clearly was in good spirits and determined to seize the moment to push for a presidential election on what will be the 19th electoral session on May 13. End comment.

RECOMMENDATION/ACTION PLAN

¶12. (S) Post recommends consideration of the following actions to support March 14 and the Siniora government in the run-up to the May 13 electoral session:

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-- Strong statements by the White House or Secretary. Such statements should emphasize that, after 18 postponements and five months without a president, and despite several attempts at dialogue that have as yet produced no solution, Lebanon needs to elect a president on May 13. Furthermore, they should reaffirm the majority's right to elect a president; the duty of all parliamentarians to go to parliament and vote; and U.S. condemnation of any persons who continue to obstruct the election and prevent the Lebanese people from having a president.

-- Additional USG statements that 1) highlight Syria's efforts to develop a clandestine nuclear program as an indication of Syria's continuing destabilizing role in the region and in Lebanon in particular; and 2) portray the extension of UNIIC's mandate as a positive development ensuring continuation of the Commissioner's Chapter 7 and ability to prepare the strongest possible cases to present to the Special Tribunal to ensure that there is no impunity for the assassination of former PM Rafiq Hariri and others.

-- A timely policy decision on AH-1 Cobra attack helicopters.

-- Continued Embassy pressure on selected members of Aoun's bloc to distance themselves from Aoun and go to parliament on May 13 to elect a president.

SISON